DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 685 CS 508 016

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TITLE Some Determinants of Conflict Dominance: A Comparative Study.
PUB DATE Oct 92
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (78th, Chicago, IL, October 29-November 1, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; Comparative Analysis; *Conflict; *Conflict Resolution; Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Differences; Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication
IDENTIFIERS China; Communication Strategies; United States

ABSTRACT

A study investigated the conceptual and functional meanings of the concept of conflict from the perspectives of United States culture (a low-context culture) and Chinese culture (a high-context culture). Subjects, 50 American and 48 Chinese graduate students in a midsize northeastern university, were interviewed using a semi-structured format to identify differences and similarities among seven variables pertaining to choice of dominant style in the two groups. Results indicated that: (1) there were many areas where the two groups' definitions converged and overlapped; (2) unpleasant feeling is universal in a conflict situation for both groups; (3) both groups emphasized the importance of giving assistance to their counterparts in a conflict situation; (4) responses were clustered into three general categories--from the subject's perspective, from the perspective of the subject's counterpart, and from the perspectives of personal and group interests; (5) significant differences existed between American interviewees and Chinese interviewees on face, seniority, severity of conflict, and gender variables; and (6) there was a large degree of similarity of rank order between the two groups. Findings suggest general support for assumptions originating from the distinction of low-context versus high-context cultures. Findings also suggest the universal nature of perceptions and feelings shown in conflict situations. (Six tables of data are included; 50 references are attached.) (RS)

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# Some Determinants of Conflict Dominance: A Comparative Study

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the determinants of conflict dominance through a comparison of 50 Americans and 48 Chinese graduate students who reflect low-context and high-context cultures respectively. The results, based on in-depth interviews, indicate differences and similarities among the seven variables pertaining to choice of dominant style in the two groups. Implicaitons for future research and limitations of the study are also discussed.

Some Determinants of Conflict Dominance: A Comparative Study

A number of studies have examined conflict resolution styles from different cultural perspectives. Hall (1976) identified two types of cultural contexts influencing the way people handle conflict: high-context and low-context cultures. According to Ting-Toomey (1985), high-context cultures emphasize "we," whereas low-context cultures emphasize "I." Low-context cultures value "individual orientations, overt communication codes, and maintain a heterogeneous normative structure with low cultural demand/low cultural constraint characteristics." High-context cultures value "group-identity orientation, covert communication codes, and maintain a homogeneous normative structure with high cultural demand/high cultural constraint characteristics" (Ting-Toomey, p. 76).

According to Ting-Toomey, low-context cultures feature several characteristics in a conflict situation: (1) individuals perceive the causes of conflict as instrumental, (2) conflicts occur when a person's normative expectations of the situation are violated, (3) individuals assume a confrontational, direct attitude toward conflicts, and (4) the tendency of individuals to use factual-inductive or axiomatic-deductive styles of conflict management. In contrast, in high-context cultures: (1) individuals perceive the causes of conflict as expressive, (2) conflicts occur when collective or cultural normative expectations of the situation are violated, (3) individuals assume a non-confrontational, indirect attitude toward conflicts, and (4)

they use affective-intuitive style of conflict management. The United States has been identified as a low-context culture, and China as a high-context culture (Leung, 1988).

The influence of culture on the selection of conflict style has been empirically examined. For example, Hsu (1953) indicated that Chinese are more situation-centered and emotion-contrained, while Americans are more individual-centered and emotion-displayed. Nomura and Barnlund (1983) discovered that Japanese tend to show less dissatisfaction than do Americans. Research from Ma (1990, 1991) consistently showed that North Americans are more explicit than Chinese in conflict situations. Chua and Gudykunst (1987) and Ting-Toomey (1988) found that low-context members tend to adopt direct and confrontation conflict styles, as opposed to indirect and avoidance styles adopted by high-context members. Another study conducted by Ting-Toomey, Trubisky, and Nishida (1989) also found that Americans use a dominating style, an integrating style, and a compromising style more than Japanese do, and Japanese use an avoidance style more than Americans do. Many other scholars provided similar findings and concluded that the use of confrontation versus non-confrontation conflict styles reflect a major difference in communication style between Chinese and Americans (e.g., Lindin, 1974; Schneider, 1985; Wolfson & Norden, 1984; Yang, 1978). Furthermore, the differences between Western and Oriental people were attributed to cultural differences (Becker, 1986; Oliver, 1961; Yum, 1988). Lastly, Leung (1988) has investigated several determinants for conflict

avoidance between Americans and Chinese. Most of the studies in this line of research have focused on the differences of conflict styles rather than the identification of causes for using different conflict styles. The lack of research in this area leads this study to examine factors that influence the choice of conflict styles. More specifically, what is of concern in this study is the investigation of determinants that cause people in high-context and low-context cultures to use different kinds of conflict style, especially focused on dominating style between Americans and Chinese.

## Determinants of Conflict Dominance

After careful examination of previous literature, we found seven variables more or less affect a person's decision to use a dominating style in conflict situations within different cultures. These variables include face, inter-relation, seniority, power, credibility, severity of the conflict, and gender. "Face" refers to the projected image of a person's self in a relationship network (Ting-Toomey, 1988). It represents an individual's social position and prestige which is gained from the successful performance of one or more specific social roles that are well recognized by other members in the society (Hu, 1944). Orientation to the use of face work reflects the conflict styles a person selects. According to Ting-Toomey (1988), low-context cultures emphasize "I" identity, self-face concern, negative-face need, and direct verbal and nonverbal expressions. In contrast, high-context cultures emphasize "we" identity, other-face concern,

positive-face need, and indirect verbal and nonverbal expressions.

Hwang (1987) indicated that in Chinese society face management is a power game often played by Chinese people. It is not only an important way to show off one's power, but also a method to manipulate "the allocator's choices of allocating resources to one's benefit" (p. 962). Losing one's face is one of the worst ways to injure one's self-esteem, and in turn results in emotional uneasiness or serious conflict. Thus, in Chinese society one has to utilize every kind of method to "earn face" (Chu, 1983), and to enhance another's face (Chiao, 1981). Lastly, Silin (1976) points out that Chinese frequently use these methods to manage a modern social organization, and Pye (1982) indicated that giving face is the key to successful negotiation with Chinese in business.

"Inter-relation" refers to the relationship between the two parties. The relationship may be as friends, family, supervisor/subordinate, or coworkers along with many other relationships. Waggenspack and Hensley (1989) indicated that college students prefer to establish relationships with those who show less argumentativeness and aggressiveness in conflict situations. Leung (1988) confirmed that a conflict is more likely to be pursued with a stranger than with a friend. According to Chiao (1982), Jacobs (1979), Hwang (1987), and Yang (1982), maintaining a proper relationship is a way for Chinese to avoid serious conflict and embarrassing encounters. Further study by Chang and Holt (1991) indicated that inter-relation is not only a tool used to avoid conflicts, but it is also used as a social

resource such as solving conflicts among people. In other words, inter-relations are "potential power in persuasion, influence, and control" (Chung, 1991, p. 9).

"Seniority" is a concept that plays an important role in the social interaction of Oriental society. Although the aged receive respect in most human societies, compared to Western society, people in the Orient show a much higher degree of respect for the elders. For example, the aged enjoy a high status in Japan (Carmichael, 1991), and seniority is a major determining factor for status and authority in Japanese organization (Nishyama, 1971). Bond and Hwang (1986) specified that Confucian tradition accords the senior member of a relationship a wide range of prerogatives and power. In a case analysis of the conflict between two factions of a ruling party in the 1990 Taiwanese presidential election campaign, Chung (1991) reported that seniority and inter-relation are the most discernible characters for the recruitment of mediators. The eight statesmen who served as conflict mediators in the case were between 78 and 92 years old.

"Power" refers to the control of resources valued by other party. According to Folger and Poole (1984), the power one exerts sustains moves and countermoves of the participants in conflict situations. Although the emphasis of power resources may be different in cultures, what is similar in most cultures is that power is the determinant of what kind of conflict styles individuals will select. For example, Americans consider the

control of material resources such as money and information to be a source of power (Nadler, Nadler, and Broome, 1985), Japanese associate power with seniority (Prosser, 1978), and Chinese use power as a dominant way to require foreigners to negotiate (Pye, 1982). All these show power is an influencing factor in a conflict situation.

"Credibility" refers to the degree of trust to one person has for another. Many scholars indicated that interpersonal trust has a significant impact on the communication process. For example, Deutsch (1968) found that perceived trust increases the amount of interpersonal communication. Griffin ((1967) reported that an increase of trust produces changes in interpersonal relationships, including control over the interaction process and the increasing acceptance of others' influence. In particular, the degree of trust among people may determine whether the persons adopt a cooperative or competitive stance in negotiations or conflict situations (Nadler, Nadler, & Broome, 1985).

"Severity of the conflict" refers to the size of the potential gain or loss in a conflict. Leung (1988) indicated that people are more likely to pursue a dispute when a high stake is involved. In other words, the size of loss in a dispute significantly affects an individual's likehood of pursuing the conflict. Similar argument was also reported by Gladwin and Walter (1980) regarding the effect of the severity involved in conflict resolution strategies in multinational corporations.

Finally, various studies have been done in regard to gender and

conflict. For example, research from Koberg and Chusmir (1989) indicated that men and women handle conflicts differently. Nevertheless, a concern in this study is how men and women handle a conflict when their counterpart is of the opposite sex. Since the status of men and women are considered different in China and American (Chen, 1988; Kohls, 1984), gender might be a variable that influences people's decisions in a conflict situation.

To briefly summarize, the previous seven factors are deemed important for examining conflict style in both low-context and high-context cultures. Because the emphasis on each factor may vary in different culture contexts, it is necessary for scholars to evaluate how these factors are related to different conflict styles in a cross-cultural comparison.

While studying conflict styles cross-culturally, it is first significant to investigate what the concept of conflict means. Is the concept of conflict equally meaningful for low-context cultures as opposed to high-context cultures? Does conflict behavior appear to be similar to people from different cultures? These general questions provide the basis for the following research questions used to investigate the conceptual and functional meanings of the concept of conflict from the perspectives of a low-context culture (i.e., the United States) and a high-context culture (i.e., China).

R1: Are there differences between American and subjects' definitions of conflict?

R2: Are there differences between American and Chinese

subjects' feelings when they are in a conflict situation?

R3: Are there differences between American and Chinese subjects on handling the conflict in the hypothetical situation?

R4: What are the elements that lead American and Chinese subjects to use a dominating style in the hypothetical conflict situation?

R5: Are there significant differences on the seven factors that influence American and chinese subjects' choices to use a dominating style in a conflict situation?

## Method

Data were collected in this study by interviewing subjects from low-context and high-context cultures. The format of the interview was semi-structured which allowed the interviewers to have follow-up and probing questions. Subjects were clearly explained the definitions of all the concepts before they answered questions 4 and 5. The following are the representative questions in the interview:

(1) Could you define what you take the concept of conflict to mean?

(2) Could you describe your feelings when you are in a conflict situation?

(3) If you were the leader in this situation, what would you do? (The question was proposed after the interviewee was asked to read a hypothetical conflict situation.)

(4) If you were the leader in this situation, and you had to use a dominating style to solve the problem, what would be

the major factors that lead you to use this style?

(5) Would you please rate the following questions on a 1 to 7 Likert scale with 1 representing "not at all," with 4 representing "not decided," and with 7 representing "very much." First, does the concept of "face" (followed by other factors including inter-relation, seniority, power, credibility, severity of the conflict, and gender) affect your decision to use the dominant style?

Subjects and Procedure

Ninety eight graduate students in a midsize northeastern university were recruited for the purpose of this study. Among them, fifty were American students with 25 males and 25 females having a mean age of 26.83. Forty eight were Chinese students with 25 males and 23 females having a mean age of 28.62. Two trained research assistants, including an American and a Chinese, conducted the interviews. The American research assistant interviewed the American students in English. The Chinese research assistant interviewed Chinese students by using both English and Mandarin whenever the situation required bilingualism. Each subject was interviewed individually, and the length of time for each interview ran from 30 to 75 minutes with an average of 40 minutes.

Although the interviewers took notes in the interview, except for those who disagreed, the interviews were taped, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured to all subjects. All the interviews were completed within two months. To solicit

subjects' responses on using a dominating style. Baxter's (1984) hypothetical scenario was slightly revised and used in this study. Subjects were asked to describe what they would do and what would cause them to use a dominating style if they were in that situation.

## Results

In order to compare the answers between American and Chinese subjects, the results of questions 1, 2, and 3 were converted to percentage rate. The percentage rate of each item is the ratio between responding frequency of each item and the total responding answers of the question. Research question 1 was concerned with the definition of conflict. Table 1 provides a summary of the most commonly occurring definitions between American and Chinese subjects.

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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The results show that there seems to be many areas where these two sets of definitions converge and overlap. For example, both groups of subjects conceptualized conflict as a negative phenomenon that affects subjects' internal reactions and external behaviors. The difference was that Chinese subjects put more emphasis on internal reactions and nonverbal cues, such as using terms like silence and horse face (i.e., facil expression showing unhappy feeling), and American subjects did not show these signs.

Research question 2 was concerned with the subjects' feelings

when they were in a conflict situation. Table 2 shows the results.

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Insert Table 2 About Here

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The results strongly suggest that unpleasant feeling is universal in a conflict situation for both groups of interviewees. Only a slight difference exists. That is, 3.80% of American subjects felt challenged in a conflict situation, while 6.25% of Chinese subjects were trying to solve it and 5.00% were trying to calm down. Moreover, 6.25% of Chinese subjects indicated that they would stop contacting their counterparts. The difference is that Chinese subjects were more likely to avoid the conflict situation.

Research question 3 refers to the methods that subjects in both groups choose when they were in the hypothetical conflict situation. The results are summarized in Table 3.

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Insert Table 3 About Here

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The results indicate that both interview groups emphasized the importance of giving assistance to their counterparts in order to complete the job. However, the American interviewees focused more on giving help by themselves, and the Chinese interviewees focused more on searching for help from group members. Moreover, 8.70% of Chinese subjects gave a low grade to the person who caused the problem, and 4.35% asked the person to re-do the assignment. This

may show that, compared to only 3.95% of American subjects who asked the person to re-do the assignment, Chinese subjects tended to be more group oriented and to use a more authoritarian style when they were the leader in a conflit situation.

Research question 4 refers to the elements that affected subjects who used a dominating style in the hypothetical conflict situation. Table 4 reports the findings.

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Insert Table 4 About Here

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The results demonstrate that the interviewees' responses were clustered into three general categories: from the subject's perspective, from the perspective of the subject's counterpart, and from the perspectives of personal and group's interests. Overall, American subjects showed a less authoritarian tendency for using a dominating style in conflict situations. Both groups of subjects used a dominating style when their counterparts showed negative or uncooperative attitudes or behaviors toward the assignment, and interests were also a major factor influencing the decision of using a dominating style to both groups of interviewees.

Research question 5 concerns the differences between American and Chinese subjects for the seven variables that influence a person's decision to use a dominating style in conflict situations. Table 5 shows the results.

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Insert Table 5 About Here

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The results show that significant differences exist between American interviewees and Chinese interviewees on face, seniority, severity of conflict, and gender.

The rank order of the seven variables is presented in Table 6.

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Insert Table 6 About Here

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The results indicate a large degree of similarity of rank order between the two groups of interviewees. Nevertheless, American subjects showed high scores (M › 5.00) on severity of conflict, credibility, and inter-relation. They showed medium scores (5.00 › M › 3.00) on power, seniority, and face, and low scores (3.00 › M › 1.00) on gender. Chinese subjects showed high scores on severity of conflict, inter-relation, and credibility, and medium scores on seniority, power, face, and gender. No item was lower than a 3.00 mean score in the Chinese group.

## Discussion

This study aimed at investigating the perception of conflict between American and Chinese people, and investigated why the two groups of people used a dominating style in a conflict situation. From the overall results two conclusions can be proposed. First, the results generally support assumptions originating from the distinction of low-context vs. high-context cultures. Results from research questions 1 demonstrate that Chinese subjects, in

contrast to American subjects, used more indirect strategies to express their feelings and emotions, and tended to avoid facing the conflict. Results of research question 2 indicated that Chinese subjects were more group oriented and emphasized the "we" identity by asking group members to help get the job done, while American subjects were more individual oriented and emphasized the "I" identity by getting the job done by themselves.

Results of research questions 5 show Chinese subjects scored significantly higher than did American subjects on the items of face, seniority, and gender, and American subjects scored significantly higher than did Chinese subjects on the items of severity of conflict. These findings are consistent with the discussions of low-context and high-context cultures, and are consistent with research on the differences between Chinese and American cultural values (e.g., Chen, 1988; Hwang, 1987; Stewart, 1972; Yum, 1988).

Results of research question 4 shows an interesting difference between Chinese and American subjects as well. When Chinese subjects were empowered, they were more likely to use an authoritarian style to manage the conflict. In other words, when Chinese people perceived that they had the legitimate authority, they tended to use a dominating style to resolve the conflict. The results are consistent with Meade and Whittaker's (1967) findings that Chinese students showed a significantly higher degree of authoritarianism than did American students. According to Wen's (1988) analysis, the integration of power and

authoritarianism in Chinese culture originated from Confucious' ideas of the hierarchial structure of sex, age, and generation.

The second conclusion from this study is the universal nature of perceptions and feelings shown in conflict situations. This phenomenon is indicated in several aspects. First, both groups of subjects perceived conflict as a negative matter that provoked negative feelings. Second, although both groups of subjects showed significant differences in most of the seven variables used in the study, the results showed a surprising similarity in the rank order of the seven variables. Moreover, from the mean scores in Table 6 we see that for Chinese subjects the seven variables showed some impact on selecting a dominating style. For American subjects, except for gender, the other variables influenced their decision to use a dominating style.

One implication that can be derived from the similarity of the results of the two groups in this study is about the classification of cultural orientation. According to Schwartz (1990), the dichotomatic classification of cultural orientation is often misleading. The dichotomy implicitly leads people to believe that the two cultural values are in polar opposition to one another. Schwartz argued that many universal values such as achievement, security, and hedonism are emphasized in both kinds of culture. The results in this study confirm that similarity exists in the two different groups of subjects. This indicates that people of different cultures may share similar values. Therefore, future research needs to include universal values in

the analytic scheme as scholars become involved in the study of different cultures.

Finally, three limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, the student subjects may not be representative of typical American and Chinese people. Second, as Cole (1989) indicated, the personal bias of subjects in the study towards a positive presentation of self may affect the interview results, especially for Chinese subjects who put more emphasis on face work. Third, because Chinese subjects used in the study were students in the United States, the length of time they stayed in the United States might affect the results of the studies. In other words, those who have been in the United States for long periods may have been acculturated in a degree that may significantly influence their response patterns. Future research should continue to improve these potential problems.

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Table 1

Summary of the Definitions of Conflict

| Americans | | Chinese | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Disagreement | 15.65% | 1. Different Opinion | 24.74% |
| 2. Argument | 14.29% | 2. Fight | 20.62% |
| 3. Different Opinion | 14.29% | 3. Incompatible Goal | 13.40% |
| 4. Dispute | 13.61% | 4. Disagreement | 11.34% |
| 5. Fight | 10.88% | 5. Dispute | 10.31% |
| 6. Incompatible Goal | 9.52% | 6. Silence | 6.19% |
| 7. Discuss/Negotiate | 6.80% | 7. Lack of Communication | 4.12% |
| 8. Confrontation | 6.12% | 8. Stubborn | 3.09% |
| 9. Disruption | 4.08% | 9. Horse Face | 2.06% |
| 10. Friction | 2.72% | 10. Dissatisfaction | 2.06% |
| 11. Stress | 2.04% | 11. Misunderstanding | 2.06% |

Table 2

Summary of the Subjects' Feelings in Conflict Situations

| Americans | | Chinese | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Angry | 22.78% | 1. Angry | 26.25% |
| 2. Frustrated | 20.25% | 2. Furious | 10.00% |
| 3. Upset | 11.39% | 3. Emotional | 10.00% |
| 4. Irritated | 8.86% | 4. Upset | 8.75% |
| 5. Stressed | 6.33% | 5. Sad | 8.75% |
| 6. Bothered | 5.06% | 6. Unhappy | 6.25% |
| 7. Confused | 5.06% | 7. Stop Contacting | 6.25% |
| 8. Threatened | 5.06% | 8. Try to Solve It | 6.25% |
| 9. Hostile | 3.80% | 9. Try to Calm Down | 5.00% |
| 10. Aggressive | 3.80% | 10. Disappointed | 5.00% |
| 11. Uncomfortable | 3.80% | 11. Disturbance | 3.75% |
| 12. Challenged | 3.80% | 12. Depressive | 3.75% |

Table 3

Summary of Methods Subjects Used in the Conflict Situation

| Americans | | Chinese | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Explain Situation | 35.53% | 1. Members' Assistance | 43.48% |
| 2. My Assistance | 32.89% | 2. My Assistance | 23.19% |
| 3. Members' Assistance | 17.11% | 3. Explain Situation | 20.29% |
| 4. Discuss with Professor | 10.53% | 4. Give Low Grade | 8.70% |
| 5. Ask to Re-do | 3.95% | 5. Ask to Re-do | 4.35% |

Table 4

Elements That Affect Using Dominating Style

| Americans | | Chinese | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Time Constraint | 15.69% | 1. My Authority | 20.83% |
| 2. Don't Care the Proj. | 13.73% | 2. I'm Right | 15.28% |
| 3. Grade on the Line | 12.75% | 3. Affect Group Inter. | 12.50% |
| 4. Poor Performance | 11.76% | 4. Grade on the Line | 8.33% |
| 5. Lack of Cooperation | 10.78% | 5. Lack of Cooperation | 6.94% |
| 6. Negative Attitude | 7.84% | 6. Poor Performance | 6.94% |
| 7. Laziness | 5.88% | 7. Don't Care the Proj. | 5.56% |
| 8. Refuse to Re-do | 5.88% | 8. Time Constraint | 5.56% |
| 9. Frustrated/Angry | 5.88% | 9. Lose My Face | 5.56% |
| 10. Members Don't Help | 3.92% | 10. Negative Attitude | 4.17% |
| 11. Affect Group Interest | 3.92% | 11. Members Don't Help | 2.78% |
| 12. My Authority | 1.96% | 12. Not Trustworthy | 2.78% |
| | | 13. Hard to Communicate | 2.78% |

Table 5

T-test of the Ten Variables That Affect Using Dominating Style

| | Americans | Chinese | t Test |
|---|---|---|---|
| Item | MN/SD | MN/SD | t Value/Prob. |
| Face | 3.44/1.74 | 4.23/1.80 | -2.20/.03 |
| Inter-relation | 5.12/1.47 | 5.19/1.58 | - .22/.83 |
| Seniority | 3.76/1.60 | 4.52/1.85 | -2.18/.03 |
| Power | 4.14/1.83 | 4.40/1.70 | - .72/.48 |
| Credibility | 5.28/1.34 | 5.02/1.66 | .85/.40 |
| Severity of Conflict | 6.22/1.09 | 5.56/1.53 | 2.44/.02 |
| gender | 1.68/1.39 | 3.25/2.08 | -4.38/.001 |

Note. N = 98. $p < .05$.

Table 6

Rank Order of the Ten Variables Between Americans and Chinese

| Americans | Mean | Chinese | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Severity of conflict | 6.22 | 1. Severity of Conflict | 5.56 |
| 2. Credibility | 5.28 | 2. Inter-relation | 5.19 |
| 3. Inter-relation | 5.12 | 3. Credibility | 5.02 |
| 4. Power | 4.14 | 4. Seniority | 4.52 |
| 5. Seniority | 3.76 | 5. Power | 4.40 |
| 6. Face | 3.44 | 6. Face | 4.23 |
| 7. Gender | 1.68 | 7. Gender | 3.23 |